

MOTHER:
Dorothy Marita Forrant Blackledge

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by Penelope Sue Blackledge Woods

The evening Mother died she and Daddy had just returned to California from a popular "fat farm" in Tecate, Mexico where Mother had posed for the camera in their private swimming pool, wearing only a sunny smile and an orchid tucked playfully in her gray pixie cut. Now dressing for dinner in the Del Coronado Hotel, Mother said,

"Ready, dear," and giggled.

Daddy turned to see his 64 year old bride dressed except that she was wearing nothing under her transparent blouse. They both burst into laughter.

Mother's off-the-wall sense of humor was her trademark all her life, as was her love for travel and adventure. The latter appetite was fed by her career as a secretary in the Foreign Service. This career provided her experiences of riding a camel, survival of a shipwreck, earthquakes and typhoons; history in the making (including Coolidge, Roosevelt, Einstein, Heifetz and Mother standing next to Charles Lindberg); cultural impressions of Havana, Buenos Aires, Valparaiso, Santiago and Tokyo as a young girl; many suitors; her impressions of religion, politics, hats, the piano; her study of Spanish and Japanese; and her avid sports activities including walking near Mount Fuji and tap-dancing at the Y). But her more traditional attributes of hard work and homemaking are what I remember most. For example

Her Hands

As I type this account I see my mother's slender hands, veined in patterns as fascinating as her personality. Mother used those hands to earn her livelihood as a young girl just out of high school.

1926, Northampton, Mass.- To Whom It May Concern: I am glad to state that Miss Dorothy M. Forrant of Ware, Massachusetts, entered this school in the fall of 1925; earned her way while attending here until she graduated in June, 1926. She maintained high grades in all her commercial studies and was an exceptionally rapid and accurate typist - - one of the best we have turned out for a number of years. (*signed*) John C. Pickett, Assistant Principal Northampton Commercial College, Inc.

1927, Washington, D.C. - TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: Miss Dorothy M. Farrant has been employed in the Department of State under my supervision since September 20, 1926. Miss Farrant is a very capable stenographer and typist, energetic, willing and conscientious in the discharge of any duties which may be assigned to her. (signed) E.B. Russ

Jan. 3, 1928, Washington, D.C. - Miss Dorothy M. Farrant. Madam: You are hereby appointed a Stenographer to the Sixth International Conference of American States to be held at Habana¹, Cuba, January 16, 1928. (signed) Frank B. Kellogg²

Jan. 1928, Havana, Cuba - Care of the Delegation of the United States, Hotel Sevilla-Biltmore, Room 105

Dearest Mother: Well, I have arrived at last. I had a wonderful journey on the boat and was seasick a little but not much. The Hotel we are staying at is the most expensive in the city. Even my room is \$10. a day without meals. Hot Dog! What does Arthur think of it? I have a private room with a private bath and a telephone and everything. The only thing is everytime you turn around you have to tip everybody. If you don't tip you don't get waited on.

The President of the United States is coming to Habana Monday and the President of Cuba has proclaimed a legal holiday in his honor.

Did I tell you the girls gave me a surprise party before leaving? They gave me a lovely robe and satin mules. And all went down to the train with me. Well Mother Cat, I will write some more later. Love, Dorothy. X X

After the Cuban conference Mother decided to apply for another country.

This led her to Buenos Aires, Argentina and later, Tokyo, Japan.

June 21, 1928, Havana - Now Kathie, I guess you think that I was not in earnest about going but now that you know I am, don't you think it is all right to go? You know what Mother will do, set up an awful howl, but Kathie if I were a boy I would be in the Navy long ago or something and she would probably see me very seldom.

After Mother's death we siblings reunited with Daddy in Houston. Mother's wedding rings glistened from atop the den television. They looked empty and quiet to her children who had watched and loved her busy hands for decades.

Daddy had given Mother the Naval Academy graduation ring in

¹ In the early 1500s, Spanish Conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez gave Havana – the sixth town founded by the Spanish on Cuba – its name: *San Cristóbal de la Habana*.

² Frank B. Kellogg was United States Secretary of State in the Cabinet of President Calvin Coolidge 1925–1929.

miniature when they married 37 years earlier. The words, "Sweet Thing," were inscribed inside. Later when the token stone fell out, Mother laughed and filled the gap with colored candle wax. Many candle-wax refills later my father had the space filled with a silver monogrammed "B".

After Daddy's death 11 years later I put the rings on my own fingers and for a decade the silver circles have bonded me to memories of my parent's enduring relationship.

Her Marriage

Oct. 30, 1929, Buenos Aires - And every time I get a letter from Mother it makes me feel like I'm the most selfish girl in the world. What will I do? I guess I'll just have to give up any idea of ever getting married because I can't tell anybody that he will have to support my Mother too and I can't leave her without enough money, and yet I would always feel bitter towards her if I was cheated out of the kind of happiness that you and Roger know. Well, I sure would appreciate Roger's advice about how much money to send home and whether things are as bad as Mother's letter makes me feel they are. I get sick to my stomach when I stop to think of it, of her being all alone, and everything, but I'm alone too and in a strange country.

Mother successfully lived off her typewriter talents for a decade before wedding a handsome widower Naval officer on April 24, 1934. He was 11 years her senior with a 5 year old daughter.

July 25, 1931, Tokyo - Dear Kathie: First I will tell you about the trip coming over. I met the nicest Lieutenant in the Navy. He has just come from teaching two years at Annapolis Naval Academy and will have three years duty in China. Well, we were together all during the trip and he sure is a peach. Very good looking and as nice as he is good looking. On board I had a great time because Allan of course knew all the naval officers and their wives and they invited me to all the little stateroom parties.

.. and I was asked to spend my vacation in Shanghai by Allan. I have never known anyone as nice as he is and I'm not going to risk any chance of losing developing this friendship just because my insurance premiums are so high I won't have enough saved by the time summer comes.

P.S. Don't tell Mother about the Lieutenant as she will put it in the news.

Her Projects

During World War II and my father's long absence, Mother kept busy

raising her daughter inherited-by-marriage and her own twin daughters, soon to be joined by baby brother Mike.

Mother's touch permeates my child-memory. It created a cared-for feeling that extends into adulthood. Efficient fingers shampooed away dandruff and rubbed in love. "Ouch, you're pulling so hard," we'd complain as she compactly secured our braids with barettes. My first-grade heart pumped with pride as I took her hand and led her along the hallway at the grade-school luncheon.

A project person with a capital "P", Mother would tackle a large endeavor, attain a degree of excellence, then turn to another.

1928, Havana - (to Mother) Well, that old Ware River news ought to be down here if they think I'm not working seven days a week and until 11 at night sometimes and often until 9:30 or 10. But it is worth it because you see a lot down here. I worked Sunday until 11 p.m. at night so Mother don't think you have to work hard at all.

Large colorful afghans were crocheted square by square. Her patient seamstress hands ripped up Daddy's worn uniforms or tore apart her old flowered seersucker evening dress and transformed them into skirts, pinafores and jumpers for her twins. Used bed sheets became blouses with ruffled cuffs. As I stood for a fitting at her sewing machine, I felt the love in my mother's hands as she lightly pinned or shifted materials and patterns on me.

July 6, 1929, Buenos Aires - Mother says that although she would like a radio she needs two new dresses and isn't working much. Gee, Kathie, I don't think it is fair. She is only working about three days a week and yet she doesn't try to save a little by making over her old clothes. She has a whole shirtwaist boxful in the bedroom and a whole closetful up stairs. I know I saw lots of slips that needed just to be sewed a little and a lot of dresses that just needed to be dyed a little and she could make curtains of old dresses and things like that. When I went to high school I used to take the old petticoats she threw in the ragbag and dye them and make dresses and I am sure nobody showed me anything about sewing, I just did it because I had to.

When cooking became an enterprise Mother worked her way through the Betty Crocker Cookbook, marking off each recipe and moving on to the next. "Our runner-up in the cake contest is Dorothy Blackledge," we heard on the radio one afternoon, "who entered a lamb-shaped cake, using cocoanut for the lamb's wool, a cherry for the nose, ..."

1929, Buenos Aires - Mother's been working about three or

four days a week on the average for about three years now. Do you think I would stay hanging on to a job like that when I was able bodied and knew if I just watched the papers that there are lots of chances in other places than Ware. There are lots of women who make money by canning jellies or making cakes. It just takes a little ambition that's all. It would be different if Mother and Arthur were sickly or something like that. They are just content to drift along and know if the worse comes to the worse little Dorothy can help them out.

Besides touch-typing, Mother insisted all of her children know how to swim. In our preteen years, swimming laps in the Indianapolis Athletic Club pool became a project as Mother set the example by reaching the top of the Dolphin chart for completing 500 miles. "Look at that lady bobbing up and down on the breaststroke," laughed Ginger, our swim teammate as she pointed at Mother's unorthodox swim style.

"That's our mother!" her 12-year old twins exclaimed, wondering what was so funny.

1928, Havana - We went to a wonderful reception last Friday that one of the millionaires at the State Department gave to the employees. He has an estate about as big as the park in Ware with a private swimming pool bigger than the Pines in Ware.

Sept. 5, 1929, Buenos Aires - I am going to join a club this month as it is the only way I will be able to get out in the open air as I can go there on Saturday afternoons and Sundays instead of moping inside all the time as I do now. I've got to get some kind of exercise if I want to keep my health and when I get out of work at night at 6:00 there is no place to take a swim like I used to in Washington. . .

Her Mothering

As tiny tots we were aware of Mother's adventurous nature. Before WW II we lived in Long Beach and made frequent treks to the grand Pacific Ocean with Mother. She would sit on the sand to crochet or knit, then eventually take off for a dip in the waves.

"Mother, Mother," we'd call, worried about her safe return as she frolicked in the foaming surf.

July 25, 1933 - Dollar Steamship Lines³, Orient and round the world, on board

Well, I arrive in Tokyo today after a swell vacation.

³ At its height in the 1920s, the Dollar Steamship Company was the largest and most successful United States shipping firm, and its signature white dollar sign mounted on red-banded stacks was known around the world.

Everyone was so nice to me in Chefoo and invited Allan and I everywhere. I played tennis and swam every day. I came back by way of Shanghai to get a look at the place but it looks too much like Buenos Aires to be interesting ... This is a wonderful ship.

Mother showed us the wonder of rain. "Please, please, may we go out, Mother, and play in the rain today?" we'd chant. Bathing suits on, we'd dance out to splash puddles, count worms, toss our heads back and with open mouths, drink falling droplets.

Mother didn't drive. Instead, she introduced us to the delight of public transportation. Travelling to the bustle of downtown via the gentle rocking motion of the streetcar or burrowing in the comforting roar and hiss of the bus made our excursions memorable.

November 23, 1929, Buenos Aires - I just came back from a week's vacation. As we went by auto we didn't have to pay a cent for transportation and we traveled all together 1250 miles. Some trip. We traveled about 8 hours every day and didn't stay in the same hotel twice in order to keep within our schedule. And what roads! All full of six feet ruts and water up to your neck. We had to go across corn fields in order to avoid the big holes in the roads, but it was all very interesting and we sure got a good idea of real Argentine country. Cordoba is the place where the only hills in the whole Republic are and they call them mountains but really they are no bigger than the hills around Ware.

Although the coat hanger was threatened, Mother's discipline was rarely physical. She got her message across by emphasizing a desired command with the repeated tapping of pointed fingers into the other palm. Her blue eyes altered to steel-gray and her countenance took on a "nothing-will-change-my-mind" look. "A job worth doing is worth doing well," she would quote as we re-made a bed. "That's a lazy man's load," she would chide if we tried to clear all the dishes from the table in one trip.

July 24, 1929, Buenos Aires - Dearest Kathie: I just got word from Arthur that he and Sallie are going to be married Labor Day, and after thinking it all over I think it is the best thing in the world, because Arthur needs someone to wake him. Nannie used to say that he had to be led but I think he has to be pushed. And you know how easy it is for the girls to pull the wool over Arthur's eyes, for example, Milly DeWitt and the other one in Ware that ran away with the baker.

Jobs reigned in our house. Our introduction to earning money came in the form of raking leaves which were in abundance during autumn in Washington D.C. Mother's sewing machine clattered out several long

sturdy bags. "Ready for inspection," we called after filling them to the brim. Mother took a look at the overflowing bags. "Why these bags aren't full," she declared bending over and smashing the dry contents to the bottom. "There's lots more room!" This scenario repeated until the penny was well earned.

1928, Havana - And then it will be 'Dottie, lend me some money.' They think I am rolling in money, I guess.

May 7, 1931, Tokyo - We are up before the House for a 15% cut in salary but I think it won't hit me because it is for people making over \$2500 and I haven't had a raise for ages on account of the Depression.

At age 10 we were introduced to the typewriter. Mother insisted on several perfect lines of "*f, j, space*" before playtime. Follow-up became writing thank-you notes, of utmost importance in Mother's etiquette book.

Dec. 13, 1929, Buenos Aires - I went swimming Saturday and invited the girl I was going with to come to lunch with me to pay her back for the times I had been invited to her house, but there's no use even trying to pay back down here because we only had a salad and snails and dessert and it cost me \$6. U.S. So that's the first and last time I'm going to try to pay anybody back.

July 1, 1930, Buenos Aires - . . . and if you don't repay people at the boarding house you have to take them to a restaurant and it costs you all outdoors.

Around the same time there was the arrival of a second brother, Pete. One day after typing practice, I wondered who Mother was talking to in a strange language of coos and ahhha. Rounding the corner, I saw my tiny brother Pete as he lay on the changing table. As he suddenly arched a fountain high into the air, Mother's unruffled acceptance of this outrageous event surprised me. Her gift of patience and enjoyment of babies became mine in later years.

"It is rude to ask for something," Mother warned at Christmastime. She was aghast that our friend made out a "list" for Santa. "The best gift you can give is one that you make," she insisted. Over the years she made much ado over homemade gifts of scented apples spiked with multiple cloves or another clay ashtray even though she did not smoke. If we complained about gifts our friends received, Mother would quote, "I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet."

"Oh, that's silly, Mother," we'd counter. "Everyone has feet." As usual, Mother knew a lot of things we didn't.

Her Homemaking

Mother never complained about the housewife's lot but kept her home humming for five children and husband. Year after year mountains of clothes were washed and tons of food were cooked, but it wasn't her calling in life. She kept a hidden agenda which she broke out later. Breakfast was always waiting, though sometimes odd by our standards.

"Ugh" we'd gag. "Jelly and cottage cheese on toast again?"

After school we would find our glass of juice waiting, along with 5 drops of cod-liver oil (10 drops in winter). We drank it fast, holding our noses. We could count on a standard non-standard dinner nightly. I dubbed Mother's stew, "candy stew," thereby winning special praise. The siblings complained, abhorring her overgenerous addition of wheat germ.

1928, Havana - Last night it cost me \$2.40 for dinner and I had only a little kind of a Spanish stew. So it is a good thing that we get \$8.00 a day to eat on.

June 13, 1929, Buenos Aires - I am taking my lunches at an Argentine boarding house just to hear the language and you ought to see the things they give me to eat. Awful blood sausages and *puchero*, which is a native dish of cabbage and old meat and boiled potatoes and anything else they happen to think of.

Mother waged a running war against such house pests as cockroaches and rodents. Any living creature, mite to mouse size, who attempted to share her kitchen, met a quick demise. This ill will carried over to neighborhood cats. "They are witches in disguise," she declared. Felines who ventured onto our porch dashed away dripping from the bucket of water sloshed out the backdoor. In spite of this, Mother encouraged brother Mike to enter the newspaper's TailWagger's contest; designing his scrapbook entry in the shape of a huge cat. Much to her eventual dismay, he became the winner of a Persian kitten. "Waggy" lasted only a short time as Mother declared him mentally unstable when he tried to climb the drapes. Mike had to settle for a fish.

Sept. 1, 1931, Tokyo, Japan - (to see the new Embassy buildings) The grounds. . . are beautiful, with a rock garden and a darling swimming pool, and a reflecting pool where they are going to put all kinds of gold fishes and water lilies. There are millions of crickets singing in the trees. You know the crickets here sing almost like birds, or whip-poor-wills. The people sell them in tiny little wicker cages where they live for about two months on sugar and water.

When Mother entered college as her twins began high school, she honed her homemaking down to bare bones. Somehow the freezer, refrigerator,

and pantry were always full and the dinner cooked. The washing was always done. As far as cleaning, her new battle cry was, "If you think the dust is too thick on the dining room table for your friends to come over, you are welcome to dust it yourself and to use the vacuum, too." We were shocked. But not shocked enough to clean house ourselves. Daddy hired an occasional housecleaner.

1929, Buenos Aires - At least Mother could make a home out of that house. It is really awfully pretty but it certainly looks very far from what it did when Arthur and I used to come and visit for the summer in Ware. And then she wonders why I go so far away from home. Well, I never had a home, a place where I wasn't ashamed to bring my friends for fear that it might be all messed up or anyhow Mother would always be yelling at us not to throw things around or make any noise or to go home early. What a life!

Mother was clean in her person and often smelled of lavender. As a high school student I recall afternoons she sat in the bathtub, frothy water up to her waist, swishing numerous pairs of hosiery about like watersogged ribbons of beige, as she listened to her French records from the next room.

July 6, 1929, Buenos Aires - So Albenia has a daughter, well some class to her. They say her husband is awfully nice. I guess I'd be just out of luck if any one ever fell for me because he'd just get the scare of his life if I brought him home and he saw Arthur with his bowl of coffee and everything on the kitchen table that was there last year and all the bathrobes and nightgowns hanging on the walls and the dirty clothes and best clothes everywhere. They are so used to it all now that they don't see the difference any more. I would be the same way if I stayed at home, I suppose, but now I could never stand it.

By college age, it was easy to take Mother for granted. The vision of her quietly lugging another basket of dirty laundry down the stairs as I sat studying makes me wish I had just once jumped up and said, "Here, little Mom. You work so hard for us. Let me do that for you!"

Her Later Years

Mother's eyesight dimmed in later years. It never changed her lifestyle, but once she looked out of the car window at the red fire hydrant near our house and asked Mike, "What's Peter doing outside without his coat on?"

Our move to Houston, Texas from Indianapolis, Indiana encouraged Mother to bring out her hidden agenda and exchange a life of exercise, projects and homemaking for ten years of intense college study.

July 6, 1929, Buenos Aires - When Arthur and Mother don't have to work in the mill they don't do anything at home.

What I mean is, they think I am just having the life of Reilly all the time. They don't realize that ever since I left school I have been studying something or other, either to improve my shorthand or Spanish and if I didn't do that I would take lessons in dressmaking or try to learn it by myself.

At age 45 Mother's busy-bee spirit took over in the new realm of higher education. Her girlhood shorthand resurfaced as she recorded every utterance by her professors, including coughs and sneezes. Her voluminous transcribed notes were much sought after by absentee students.

1929, Buenos Aires - They just say, Dottie's lucky. Well, maybe it is luck to study Spanish everyday and to work overtime every chance I get to show them that I want to make good.

Mother graduated with a degree in languages at the same time her twin daughters graduated from another university. The difference was that Mother graduated "cum laude". She continued on to earn a Masters in languages, then was felled from her education path by a heart attack as she began doctorate study. Mother jumped back up, literally and figuratively, and fulfilled her dream of holding a professional job outside the home as a high school language teacher in her last ten years.

Mother laughed at death. "Cowards die many times before theft death," she'd quote to a fearful daughter. "The valiant taste of death but once."

June 8, 1930, Buenos Aires - Don't tell Mother but I have been having a pain in my side and went to the doctor and had an x-ray taken and I have fallen intestines. But as usual I have been very lucky as he has been giving me three electrical massages a week and I pay for my treatments by giving him English lessons as he is a German doctor. The lessons are very interesting as we go to the swellest tea room in town and all I have to do is to talk to him and correct him when he says something wrong. He is a well-known German surgeon here and is opening a sanatorium shortly. I feel much better now but am getting horribly fat as he is making me take half a pint of thick, thick cream and a quarter of pound of butter every day. There's nothing to worry about as I'm getting along fine now. The only thing is I'm supposed to get all the exercise I can but we work till so late and I'm so tired after the three lessons a week that I don't feel like moving around.

My husband and I visited Mother in the hospital after her first heart attack at age 54. She whipped off her oxygen mask and began joking and laughing. Gaiety in grim times was her trademark.

August 25, 1930 Buenos Aires - I'm feeling fine after the operation and can do anything but play tennis as that is

too strenuous.

Dec. 31, 1931, Tokyo - Oh yes, I got a Christmas telegram from the doctor who operated on me for appendicitis in B.A.

Her Religion

Mother was raised a Roman Catholic.

June 13, 1929, Buenos Aires - Dearest Mother: P.S. Anne and I went to confession and communion last Saturday so you don't need to worry about that.

July 6, 1929, Buenos Aires - I am living with an Argentine family now and they are just as nice to me as they can be. They were so pleased to know that I was a Catholic and the lady put a picture of the Sacred Heart over the bed.

September 5, 1929, Buenos Aires - Mother says she has been praying to St. Anthony for someone to send her money for coal and that it is \$16.75 a ton so Kathie, I can't be hardhearted enough to refuse her anything like coal when she isn't working hardly any, so the fifteenth of this month I will send you \$10 for the radio and \$17 for the coal.

Mother decided in her late twenties that Catholicism was "an iron hand in a velvet glove" and turned away. After she died there hung from the dining-room wall a recent purchase of a large painting from Mexico. It was a huge yellow butterfly. It made me think that as a result of Mother's youthful Christian understanding that she believed in the Resurrection as can be symbolized by the butterfly's rebirth. Today when I see a butterfly flitting about, I think of her and sometimes I whisper, "Hi, Mother."

Her Legacy

Mother was on a Mother pedestal and there she will forever be. Our relationship was always mother-daughter, never friend-friend. I was a project to be completed in Mother's eyes. She was a respected image of a woman, wife and mother in mine.

Sept. 26, 1932, Tokyo - I wrote Mother about not butting in, etc. I'm awfully sorry Kathie. Maybe I scared her this time. I can't understand her at all.

I thrived from Mother's verbal blessings. They were constant and uplifting. "You can be an artist/writer/teacher," sounded her coaxings of confidence. "Just keep trying. Remember the Little Engine That Could."

After I married and moved away, there was an empty echo in the air that I kept listening for. Mother's endowment of pet names for each of us, such as "dear", "bunny", "rabbit", "darling", made us feel special. We, in turn,

took to calling her, "Mother Mouse", after leaving home.

June 4, 1929, Buenos Aires - Well, Mother Cat, I have to get back to work now.. . . tell Arthur to have a swim for me.

I have not described Mother physically. Now I know why. Even though she was beautiful, it was her gentle spirit I perceived, followed and loved and that is the part of her that will be with me always.